

# God's Greatest Surprise

## Introduction

*He didn't call Himself "the reverend Holiness Angelic Divinity III." He didn't insist on plush, royal robes or gleaming, golden scepters. He didn't come on the wings of a heavenly host, live in a celestial palace, or march at the head of an angelic honor guard.*

*He was the son of a carpenter in a remote section of an oppressed nation. He was God's greatest surprise. The heart of heaven wrapped in human flesh. If you've forgotten what He's really like—or you'd like to get to know Him better— read on!*

## From Heaven to Earth with Love

*"You mean to tell me God became a baby..."*

The one posing the questions was puzzled. His thick eyebrows furrowed in doubt and his eyes squinted in caution. Though there were places to sit, he opted not to do so. He preferred to stand safely behind the crowd, unsure, yet intrigued by what he was hearing. Throughout the lecture he had listened intently, occasionally uncrossing his arms to stroke his whiskered chin. Now, however, he stood upright, punching the air with his finger as he queried.

*and that he was born in a sheep stable?"*

He looked as though he'd walked down from one of the adjacent Colorado mountains: stocking hat, down vest, nylon leggings, hiking boots. And he sounded as though he honestly didn't know if the story he was hearing was a mountain legend or the gospel truth.

*"Yes, that is what I mean to say,"* the lecturer responded.

*"And then, after becoming a baby he was raised in a blue-collar home? He never wrote any books or held any offices, yet he called himself the Son of God?"*

*"That is right."*

The lecturer being questioned was Landon Saunders, the voice of the Heartbeat Radio program. I've never heard anybody tell the story of the Nazarene like Landon can.

*"He never traveled outside of his own country, never studied at a university, never lived in a palace, and yet asked to be regarded as the creator of the universe?"*

*"That's correct."*

I was a bit unnerved by the dialogue. I was fresh out of college, gung ho, enthusiastic. As a volunteer helper in the lecture series, I had come with memorized verses and responses loaded in the chamber of my evangelistic six-shooter. However, I came prepared to defend a lifestyle, not a Savior. I was ready to argue morality, doctrine, heaven and hell. I wasn't ready to argue a man. Jesus had always been someone I just accepted. These questions were a too aggressive for my virgin faith.

*"And this crucifixion story. . . he was betrayed by his own people? No followers came to his defense? And then he was executed like a common junkyard thief?"*

*"That's the gist of it."*

The authenticity of the questioner didn't allow you to regard him as a cynic nor to dismiss him as a show-off. To the contrary he seemed nervous about commanding such attention. His awkwardness betrayed his inexperience in public speaking. But his desire to know was just an ounce or two heavier than his discomfort, so he continued.

*"And after the killing he was buried in a borrowed grave?"*

*"Yes, he had no grave of his own, nor money with which to purchase one."*

The honesty of the dialogue kept the audience spellbound. I realized I was witnessing one of those rare times when two people were willing to question the holy. Here were two men standing on opposite sides of a deep chasm, one asking the other if the bridge that stretched between them could actually be trusted.

There was a hint of emotion in the student's voice as he carefully worded the next question.

*"And according to what's written, after three days in the grave he was resurrected and made appearances to over five hundred people?"*

*"Yes."*

*"And all this was to prove that God still loves his people and provides a way for us to return to him?"*

*"Right."*

I knew which question was coming next. Everyone in the room knew it. It could have gone without being asked. In my heart of hearts, I was hoping that it wouldn't be asked.

*"Doesn't that all sound rather. . ."* He paused a second, searching for the right adjective. *"Doesn't that all sound rather absurd?"*

All the heads turned in perfect sync and looked at Landon. All the heads, that is, except mine. My head was spinning as I was forced to look at Jesus from a new angle. Christianity . . . absurd? Jesus on a cross. . . absurd? The Incarnation. . . absurd? The

Resurrection... absurd? My Sunday school Jesus had been taken down from the flannel board.

Landon's response was simple. "*Yes. Yes I suppose it does sound absurd doesn't it?*"

I didn't like that answer. I didn't like it at all. Tell the fellow how it made sense! Diagram the dispensations. Present fulfilled prophecies. Explain the fulfillment of the Old Law. Covenant. Reconciliation. Redemption. Sure it made sense. Don't let him describe God's actions as absurd!

Then it began to dawn on me: *What* God did makes sense. It makes sense that Jesus would be our sacrifice because a sacrifice was needed to justify man's presence before God. It makes sense that God would use the Old Law to tutor Israel on their need for grace. It makes sense that Jesus would be our High Priest. *What* God did makes sense. It can be taught, charted, and put in books on systematic theology.

However, *why* God did it is absolutely absurd. When one leaves the method and examines the motive, the carefully stacked blocks of logic begin to tumble. That type of love isn't logical; it can't be neatly outlined in a sermon or explained in a term paper.

Think about it. For thousands of years, using his wit and charm, man had tried to be friends with God. And for thousands of years he had let God down more than he had lifted him up. He'd done the very thing he promised he'd never do. It was a fiasco. Even the holiest of the heroes sometimes forgot whose side they were on. Some of the scenarios in the Bible look more like the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor than stories for vacation Bible school. Remember these characters?

Aaron. Right-hand man to Moses. Witness of the plagues. Member of the "Red Sea Riverbed Expedition." Holy priest of God. But if he was so saintly, what was he doing leading the Israelites in fireside aerobics in front of the golden calf?

The sons of Jacob. The fathers of the tribes of Israel. Great-grandsons of Abraham. Yet, if they were so special, why were they gagging their younger brother and sending him to Egypt?

David. The man after God's own heart. The King's king. The giant-slayer and songwriter. He's also the guy whose glasses got steamy as a result of a bath on a roof. Unfortunately, the water wasn't his, nor was the woman he was watching.

And Samson. Swooning on Delilah's couch, drunk on the wine, perfume, and soft lights. He's thinking, *She's putting on something more comfortable*. She's thinking, *I know I put those shears in here somewhere*.

Adam adorned in fig leaves and stains of forbidden fruit. Moses throwing both a staff and a temper tantrum. King Saul looking into a crystal ball for the will of God. Noah, drunk and naked in his own tent.

These are the chosen ones of God? This is the royal lineage of the King? These are the ones who were to carry out God's mission?

It's easy to see the absurdity.

Why didn't he give up? Why didn't he let the globe spin off its axis?

Even after generations of people had spit in his face, he still loved them. After a nation of chosen ones had stripped him naked and ripped his incarnated flesh, he still died for them. And even today, after billions have chosen to prostitute themselves before the pimps of power, fame, and wealth, he still waits for them.

It *is* inexplicable. It doesn't have a drop of logic nor a thread of rationality.

And yet, it is that very irrationality that gives the gospel its greatest defense. For only God could love like that.

I don't know what happened to that inquisitive fellow in Colorado. He disappeared as quickly as he came. But I'm in his debt. He forced me to see Jesus as I'd never seen him.

At first I didn't recognize him. I guess I was expecting someone in a flowing frock with silky-white hands. But it was he. The lion. The Judean Lion. He walked out from among the dense trees of theology and ritual and lay down in a brief clearing. In his paw was a wound and in his mane were stains of blood. But there was a royalty about him that silenced even the breeze in the trees.

Bloodstained royalty. A God with tears. A creator with a heart. God became earth's mockery to save his children.

How absurd to think that such nobility would go to such poverty to share such a treasure with such thankless souls.

But he did.

In fact, the only thing more absurd than the gift is our stubborn unwillingness to receive it.

## The Choice of the Carpenter

The heavy door creaked on its hinges as he pushed it open. In a few strides he crossed the silent shop and opened the wooden shutters to a square shaft of sunshine that pierced the darkness, painting a box of daylight on the dirt floor.

He looked around the carpentry shop. He stood for a moment in the refuge of the little room that housed so many sweet memories. He balanced the hammer in his hand. He ran his fingers across the sharp teeth of the saw. He stroked the smoothly worn wood of the sawhorse. He had come to say good-bye.

It was time for him to leave. He had heard something that made him know it was time to go. So he came one last time to smell the sawdust and lumber.

Life was peaceful here. Life was so... safe.

Here he had spent countless hours of contentment. On this dirt floor he had played as a toddler while his Either worked. Here Joseph had taught him how to grip a hammer. And on this workbench he had built his first chair.

I wonder what he thought as he took one last look around the room. Perhaps he stood for a moment at the workbench looking at the tiny shadows cast by the chisel and shavings. Perhaps he listened as voices from the past filled the air.

"Good job, Jesus."

"Joseph, Jesus—come and eat!"

"Don't worry sir, we'll get it finished on time. I'll get Jesus to help me"

I wonder if he hesitated. I wonder if his heart was torn. I wonder if he rolled a nail between his thumb and fingers, anticipating the pain.

It was in the carpentry shop that he must have given birth to his thoughts. Here concepts and convictions were woven together to form the fabric of his ministry.

You can almost see the tools of the trade in his words as he spoke. You can see the trueness of a plumb line as he called for moral standards. You can hear the whistle of the plane as he pleads for religion to shave away unnecessary traditions. You can picture the snugness of a dovetail as he demands loyalty in relationships. You can imagine him with a pencil and a ledger as he urges honesty.

It was here that his human hands shaped the wood his divine hands had created. And it was here that his body matured while his spirit waited for the right moment, the right day.

And now that day had arrived.

It must have been difficult to leave. After all, life as a carpenter wasn't bad. It wasn't bad at all. Business was good. The future was bright and his work was enjoyable.

In Nazareth he was known only as Jesus, the son of Joseph. You can be sure he was respected in the community. He was good with his hands. He had many friends. He was a favorite among the children. He could tell a good joke and had a habit of filling the air with contagious laughter.

I wonder if he wanted to stay. He could do a good job here in Nazareth. Settle down. Raise a family. Be a civic leader.

I wonder because I know he had already read the last chapter. He knew that the feet that would step out of the safe shadow of the carpentry shop would not rest until they'd been pierced and placed on a Roman cross.

You see, he didn't have to go. He had a choice. He could have stayed. He could have kept his mouth shut. He could have ignored the call or at least postponed it. And had he chosen to stay, who would've known? Who would have blamed him?

He could have come back as a man in another era when society wasn't so volatile, when religion wasn't so stale, when people would listen better.

He could have come back when crosses were out of style.

But his heart wouldn't let him. If there was hesitation on the part of his humanity it was overcome by the compassion of his divinity. His divinity heard the voices. His divinity heard the hopeless cries of the poor, the bitter accusations of the abandoned, the dangling despair of those who are trying to save themselves.

And his divinity saw the faces. Some wrinkled. Some weeping. Some hidden behind veils. Some obscured by fear. Some earnest with searching. Some blank with boredom. From the face of Adam to the face of the infant born somewhere in the

world as you read these words, he saw them all.

And you can be sure of one thing. Among the voices that found their way into that carpenter's shop in Nazareth was your voice. Your silent prayers uttered on tearstained pillows were heard before they were said. Your deepest questions about death and eternity were answered before they were asked. And your direst need, your need for a Savior, was met before you ever sinned.

He left because of you.

He laid his security down with his hammer. He hung tranquillity on the peg with his nail apron. He closed the window shutters on the sunshine of his youth and locked the door on the comfort and ease of anonymity.

Since he could bear your sins more easily than he could bear the thought of your hopelessness, he chose to leave.

It wasn't easy. Leaving the carpentry shop never has been.

# Jesus, Our Approachable Savior

Many of the names in the Bible that refer to our Lord are nothing less than palatial and august: Son of God, The Lamb of God, The Light of the World, The Resurrection and the Life, The Bright and Morning Star, He that Should Come, Alpha and Omega.

They are phrases that stretch the boundaries of human language in an effort to capture the uncapturable, the grandeur of God. And try as they might to draw as near as they may, they always fall short. Hearing them is somewhat like hearing a Salvation Army Christmas band on the street corner play Handel's *Messiah*. Good try, but it doesn't work. The message is too majestic for the medium.

And such it is with language. The phrase "There are no words to express. . ." is really the only one that can honestly be applied to God. No names do him justice.

But there is one name which recalls a quality of the Master that bewildered and compelled those who knew him. It reveals a side of him that, when recognized, is enough to make you fall on your face.

It is not too small, nor is it too grand. It is a name that fits like the shoe fit Cinderella's foot.

Jesus.

In the gospels it's his most common name—used almost six hundred times. And a common name it was. Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, Jeshua, and Jehoshua—all familiar Old Testament names. There were at least five high priests known as Jesus. The writings of the historian Josephus refer to about twenty people called Jesus. The New Testament speaks of Jesus Justus, the friend of Paul,<sup>1</sup> and the sorcerer of Paphos is called Bar-Jesus<sup>2</sup>. Some manuscripts give Jesus as the first name of Barabbas. "Which would you like me to release to you—Jesus Barabbas or Jesus called the Messiah?"<sup>3</sup>

What's the point? Jesus could have been a "Joe." If Jesus came today, his name might have been John or Bob or Jim. Were he here today, it is doubtful he would distance himself with a lofty name like Reverend Holiness Angelic Divinity III. No, when God chose the name his son would carry, he chose a human name<sup>4</sup>. He chose a name so typical that it would appear two or three times on any given class roll. "The Word became flesh," John said, in other words.

He was touchable, approachable, reachable. And, what's more, he was ordinary. If he were here today you probably wouldn't notice him as he walked through a shopping mall. He wouldn't turn heads by the clothes he wore or the jewelry he flashed.

"Just call me Jesus," you can almost hear him say.

He was the kind of fellow you'd invite to watch the Rams-Giants game at your house. He'd wrestle on the floor with your kids, doze on your couch, and cook steaks on your grill. He'd laugh at your jokes and tell a few of his own. And when you spoke, he'd listen to you as if he had all the time in eternity.

And one thing's for sure, you'd invite him back.

It is worth noting that those who knew him best remembered him as Jesus. The titles Jesus Christ and Lord Jesus are seen only six times. Those who walked with him remembered him not with a title or designation, but with a name—Jesus.

Think about the implications. When God chose to reveal himself to mankind, what medium did he use? A book? No, that was secondary. A church? No. That was consequential. A moral code? No. To limit God's revelation to a cold list of do's and don'ts is as tragic as looking at a Colorado road map and saying that you'd seen the Rockies.

When God chose to reveal himself, he did so (surprise of surprises) through a human body. The tongue that called forth the dead was a human one. The hand that touched the leper had dirt under its nails. The feet upon which the woman wept were callused and dusty. And his tears. . . oh, don't miss the tears. . . they came from a heart as broken as yours or mine ever has been.

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses."<sup>5</sup>

So, people came to him. My, how they came to him! They came at night; they touched him as he walked down the street; they followed him around the sea; they invited him into their homes and placed their children at his feet. Why? Because he refused to be a statue in a cathedral or a priest in an elevated pulpit. He chose instead to be Jesus.

There is not a hint of one person who was afraid to draw near him. There were those who mocked him. There were those

who were envious of him. There were those who misunderstood him. There were those who revered him. But there was not one person who considered him too holy, too divine, or too celestial to touch. *There was not one person who was reluctant to approach him for fear of being neglected*

Remember that.

Remember that the next time you find yourself amazed at your own failures.

Or the next time acidic accusations bum holes in your soul.

Or the next time you see a cold cathedral or hear a lifeless liturgy.

Remember. It is man who creates the distance. It is Jesus who builds the bridge.

“Just call me Jesus.”

<sup>1</sup>Colossians 4:11 <sup>2</sup>Acts 13:6 <sup>3</sup>Matthew 27:17; William Barclay, *Jesus As They Saw Him* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans). <sup>4</sup>Matthew 1:21 <sup>5</sup>Hebrews 4:15

# Study Guide

## Chapter 1: From Heaven to Earth with Love

*1. After a nation of chosen ones had stripped him naked and ripped his incarnated flesh, he still died for them. And even today, after billions have chosen to prostitute themselves before the pimps of power, fame, and wealth, he still waits for them. It is inexplicable. It doesn't have a drop of logic nor a thread of rationality. And yet, it is that very irrationality that gives the gospel its greatest defense. For only God could love like that*

- A. Have you ever felt that the story of Jesus is absurd? Do you ever talk with people who challenge the authenticity of the story? How do you answer them?
- B. How do these passages describe the love of God: Romans 5:6-8; Titus 3:3-8; Romans 8:13-17, 31-39?
- C. According to 1 John 4:7-21, if we truly understand God's love for us, what is our response to him? What is our response to others? How does it affect our attitude toward the judgment day? What emotion cannot coexist with God's love in us?
- D. When have you felt God's love most strongly? In what ways do you express God's love to others? How do you express your love to God?

*2. God became earth's mockery to save his children. How absurd to think that such nobility would go to such poverty to share such a treasure with such thankless souls. But he did. In fact, the only thing more absurd than the gift is our stubborn unwillingness to receive it.*

- A. How do we receive God's gift of salvation? Why do you think people don't accept God's gift of salvation?
- B. Look up the following passages which describe people rejecting salvation: Luke 14:15-24; Romans 9:30-32; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. According to these passages, what attitudes prevent people from accepting God's gift?
- C. According to these passages, what are some of the attitudes and actions that characterize those who do accept God's salvation: Philippians 3:7-11; 2 Corinthians 7:10; Ephesians 2:8-9; James 1:19-27?
- D. What attitude or action is the biggest challenge to your salvation?

## Chapter 2: The Choice of the Carpenter

*1. You see, he didn't have to go. He had a choice. He could have stayed. He could have kept his mouth shut. He could have ignored the call or at least postponed it.*

- A. Did Jesus have a choice? Do you think he made that choice once or numerous times? Do you think he ever doubted that humanity was worth the price he was going to pay?
- B. What do the following passages reveal about not only Jesus' willingness but his determination to die for our sins: John 10:11-18; Matthew 26:36-54; John 18:4-11; Philippians 2:6-8; Hebrews 7:23-27?
- C. On a piece of paper, in one column list everything Jesus chose to give up for your sake. In a second column, list everything he has asked you to give up for his sake.

*2. He saw your face aglow the hour you first knew him. He saw your face in shame the hour you first fell. The same face that looked back at you from this morning's mirror, looked at him. And it was enough to kill him. He left because of you.*

- A. Is it difficult to conceive of Jesus seeing you and hearing you centuries before you were born? Is it difficult to realize that even now he sees and understands everything about you? How do you make Jesus a present reality in your life?
- B. To better understand how well Jesus knows each of us, read the following passages: Psalm 139:1-18; Matthew 10:29-31; Hebrews 4:13. What insights do they give?
- C. Read one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion (e.g. Matthew 26:36—27:61). Can you imagine



someone choosing to suffer that pain and abuse specifically for you? Can you imagine God choosing to do so? Why did God choose to die for you?

D. How would it alter your life if a friend died for you? How does it alter your life to realize that Jesus died for you?

## Chapter 3: Jesus, Our Approachable Savior

*There was not one person who considered him too holy, too divine, or too celestial to touch. There was not one person who was reluctant to approach him for fear of being rejected.*

A. For what reasons did people approach Jesus? What were people's reactions to him?

B. How did Jesus treat the outcasts of society? The moral outcasts (John 8:1-11)? The social outcasts (Mark 2:13-17)? The physical and spiritual outcasts (Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 5:1-20)?

C. How did Jesus treat those who rejected him? Judas (Matthew 26:47-50)? Peter (Mark 14:66-72; 16:1-7)? the rich, young ruler (Mark 10:17-27)? What is the most surprising element of each instance?

D. For whom were Jesus' harshest words reserved (Matthew 23; John 2:12-16)? Why did Jesus condemn them?

E. How Christ-like and approachable are you? to your children? your mate? your co-workers? strangers that you meet daily? those less fortunate than you? those who are "lower on the social ladder"? What could you do to make yourself more approachable?

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